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Inspiration Examined: Towards a methodology

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Abstract

How are museum collections used as a source of inspiration by creative practitioners? This article describes a project, *Inspiration Examined*, funded by Share Academy, which used a narrative research method to critically examine the process of inspiration using interviews with students carried out at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA).

Share Academy was a partnership project between University College London (UCL), University of the Arts London (UAL) and the London Museums Group, with the aim of exploring the potential for more effective and mutually beneficial collaborations between Higher education and specialist London museums. See

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/research/share-academy/index>

Keywords

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Introduction

In the creative arts ‘inspiration’ is taken as a foundational term that expresses the ineffable characteristic of creativity. More recently its use has proliferated to define the mission and function of creative capital. In the *Inspiration Examined* project, we sought to examine the assumption that museum collections and archives ‘inspire’ by conducting filmed and audio interviews at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) with seven MA Textile students studying at Chelsea College of Arts (University of the Arts London).¹ In addition to matching the students’ interests to MoDA’s collections, we brought the synergy of our interests as design historians exploring the history and culture of museums and collections. Below we describe the background to the project, and MoDA as a site for object-based research. We discuss why narrative research provided a method that helped us unpack the *process* of inspiration and to reflect critically on our use of the interviews.

The discourse of inspiration

The discourse of inspiration is now firmly embedded in the wider museum sector: ‘Museum collections and the knowledge of museum professionals inspire learning [...] Museums inspire people to do, visit, create and share’ (Anon. 2010). It was also clearly stated in an evaluation of the impact of DCMS/DfES Strategic Commissioning in 2003–2004 in the title of the report, and throughout its content: inspiration extended beyond enjoyment and creativity to identity and community building (Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2004). A Museums Association’s report pointed to the social benefits associated with museum visits, adding: ‘Museums inspire people and ideas [...] people see museums as places of stimulating ideas,

where learning is active [...] [Museums] stimulate contemplation, curiosity and creativity [...]’ (Anon. 2013).

Discussed in these contexts, ‘inspiration’ is a loose term, defined – if at all – as a general sense of uplifted-ness, of spiritual nourishment, experienced by the general visitor.

Museums have adopted and incorporated the galvanizing impetus of inspiration to counter the passivity with which they were formerly associated. Inspiration in the creative industries and education also functions as shorthand for imaginative engagement and original, subjective practices, in which inspiration ‘comes from anywhere and everywhere’ (Anon. n.d.). In this project, we wanted to explore inspiration as a specific part of the creative process, as experienced by people who visit museums to gain ‘inspiration’ for a creative project. This kind of inspiration, we contend, is of a different order to the general sense of awe or wonder often equated with ‘inspiration’ for general visitors; it should rather be thought of in terms of a deep process of thinking and learning through engagement with objects. We were interested in the ways in which this process was articulated by practitioners.

Museum education has been extensively researched over the past 30 years, with the main focus on informal learning experiences of general visitors to museums (Hooper-Greenhill 1994). Other studies have looked at how visitors construct knowledge based on their previous experiences and at how children learn from museum collections (Hein 1998). Only relatively recently has attention turned to the question of how students in higher education learn from and interact with museum collections. Recent studies have looked at the workings of specific student projects within a museum context, at students’ engagement

with objects in museum galleries or have discussed the value of students' learning from objects in a general sense (Cook et al. 2010; Hannan et al. 2013: 159–68). However, little attention has been paid to the processes by which individuals experience creative inspiration through their engagement with specific objects. Does this differ in any way from a more generalized notion of inspiration? We were interested in studio-based art and design students as learners on the assumption that, unlike 'leisure' visitors, their visits are more purposeful and outcomes-driven, learners who need to see the value of their visit for their own creative practice to be engaged.

The MoDA is part of Middlesex University and is a resource for students, researchers and for the wider public. As a museum that is part of a University we need to understand and articulate the value of students' engagements with collections. Access to MoDA's collections is by appointment in the study room where the visit is mediated by a member of staff. We were interested in examining more closely how this interaction between student, staff member and object actually worked.

The Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA)

MoDA holds several collections that relate to the furnishing of 'ordinary' homes of the early and mid-twentieth century, the design of commercial wallpaper and textiles for the home, and to inter-war suburbia. The collections also encompass related visual and material culture including graphic design, illustration, typography, fashion and architecture. The Museum's main collection is that of the Silver Studio, a commercial design studio that operated from 1880 to 1963. The contents of that working studio (including wallpapers, textiles, designs and all manner of related ephemera, visual reference material and business

records) were given to Hornsey College of Art in the late 1960s, with the intention that the material should become a learning resource for students. Hornsey subsequently became part of Middlesex University, and since the 1960s, further collections have been acquired that contribute to the idea of design as process and finished product (Turner 1980; Hoskins and Hendon 2008; Cleaver et al. 2015).

The bequest of the Silver Studio Collection stemmed from the same impetus that had led to the formation of the South Kensington Museum (subsequently the V&A): the conviction that design education should involve learning from historical examples (Burton 1999). Until the nineteenth century, art education traditionally involved learning by copying old masters or classical sculptures, and the same assumptions underpinned design education, namely, the 'expectation that to see superior design would lead to the assimilation of good design standards, to the production of better design, and ultimately to improved industrial production' (Ganz Blythe 2013b: 117). In this context, museum collections were assumed not to offer 'inspiration', but rather to disseminate 'General Principles of Decorative Art': they did not encourage creative freedom of expression because, as Henry Cole stated: "'art has its dogmas and its orthodoxy" which our Schools of Design have yet to learn and teach' (quoted in Burton 1999: 30). In the twentieth century, art and design education began to move away from a theory of learning that emphasized looking at and copying historical examples, towards the idea of creative self-expression. New strands of art and design educational thinking, from the Bauhaus to Basic Design, were founded on the idea that students should reject historical precedents and question the 'authority and inequalities embodied in museums' (Ganz Blythe 2013a: 88). The idea of museums as sources of

learning from exemplars was gradually replaced by the idea of museums as sources of fuel for innovation and creativity.

Inspiration examined

A duality has arisen that has led to on the one hand, the museum sector's insistence that 'inspiration' is a general value of museum visiting; on the other, the suggestion that within art and design education inspiration-as-innovation is the most important benefit.

Nevertheless, many art and design students appear to be discouraged by the idea of using museums and archives, perhaps because the *process* of their engagement is not always clear to them. What is supposed to happen when they examine these objects? Some academic staff support the idea that students should use museum collections, but are reluctant to say exactly what they hope will be achieved: they are unwilling or unable to articulate what they expect their students to learn, implying a slightly mystical process that is hard to quantify and akin to 'magic' (Lyon 2011: 104). Indeed, the thinking behind *Inspiration Examined* is not uncontroversial because it raises the question of the extent to which art and design students can be taught at all. As Reading notes:

Acknowledging that it is possible to articulate this process and use this understanding to support students is a controversial point for some scholars and practitioners working in art and design. The implication that improvements in students' performance could be related to a better understanding of the processes of inquiry and improvements in teaching and learning rather than resting on the individual and innate qualities of the artist/designer may be an emotional

adjustment for the discipline. It also raises the question whether knowing more about the processes of inquiry will help us improve student performance. (2008: 7)

Inspiration Examined started from the assumption that it is not only possible to interrogate the nature of the process of inspiration, but that investigation is required to better understand what goes on when art and design students interact with museum objects, culturally and educationally intended to cultivate a creative response and outcome.

The funding and time available for this project meant that we worked with seven student participants from the Chelsea MA Textile course.² We recruited participants who wanted to engage with MoDA's collections in the process of developing their own work. Our decision to work with post-graduate students was partly informed by our assumption that they would be better able than undergraduates to identify themselves as independent practitioners, and hence more likely to 'demonstrate a commitment to interrogating their own motivations and intentions for their work and how this relates to broader discussions within their discipline' and we assumed they would be able to use 'their capacity to self-author their work to guide their engagement with museum collections and other sources of inspiration' (Reading 2008: 27). The research was in part a way of testing this assumption.

In analysing the interviews it is important to note the definition of 'participants': we acknowledge our own role as interviewers as an active part of the meaning-making process and we also recognize the agency of objects themselves in contributing to shared meaning-making. 'Attention to the actions of all participants brings the dynamics of conversation into view – an essential element of the local context' (Riessmann 2011: 311). However, we were

keen to elicit students' own responses to the objects, rather than being drawn into discussion about what the 'right' answers were. Therefore, although it might appear that:

the interviewer's definitions appear dominant, it is important to recognise that acquiescence by respondents represents active participation on their part in the construction of the meaning of the questions [...] Respondents' acceptance of interviewers' frameworks of meaning is a key factor in 'successful' interviewing.
(Mishler 1986: 64)

The discourse of the interview is co-constructed by all to arrive at a narrative that unpacks the process of inspiration: '[...] how interviewers reformulate questions and how respondents frame answers in terms of their reciprocal understanding as meanings emerge during the course of an interview' (Mishler 1986: 52).

Narrative research

Our decision to use interviews was based on Sandino's current work using life-history narrative research with curators at the V&A (Sandino 2012, Sandino 2009). This led us to think about using qualitative interviews to examine inspiration as it is articulated in spoken narratives, a form with which participants would be familiar as it also mirrored the kinds of narratives that they would be asked to provide during a studio 'crit' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Although we had no idea what they might say or how they might articulate the encounter with MoDA's collections, we suspected that in addressing us as their audience, students might use stories, anecdotes or description as a means to convey their particular enthusiasm for certain objects over others, that narratives would provide the form for their

articulation of the process of inspiration (Andrews 2008; Riessmann 2011). However, in addition to our interest in what participants said, it was also important to record the objects selected and the interaction that they generated. Consequently, we used both audio and video recordings as documentary evidence that would enable us to study what happens when (textile) practitioners are confronted with museum textile collections.

The filming took place in MoDA's study room, framing each participant in a stable mid-shot that captured their interaction with the objects (Figure 1). Although the advantage of this framing is its dedicated focus and uncluttered evidence, making it easier for transcription and analysis, related contextual material including us off-screen asking questions was not included (Luff and Heath 2012). We saw the research as being on or about the participants; at that stage we did not take into account the ways in which we were part of the frame, except in so far as we encouraged the participants to talk freely, and create a non-judgemental environment sufficiently distinct from the context of justification expected of them in the art college. Apart from the conventional filming and positioning, the interview questions were standardized although not repeated verbatim as we wanted to maintain an informal but interested situation, led by the participants' responses. Everyone was clear that the focus was on 'inspiration' and how MoDA's objects might generate it. Questions began with asking about the student's current projects, which led on to the exploration of the material that participants had requested to see in advance of the filming.

Interviews provide a core means of expression and identity-construction in which artists (and others) seek to explain and recount their processes, their ambitions and their sense of selfhood (Sandino 2010). Creative work is, moreover, conventionally associated with self-

actualization (Taylor and Littleton 2012). As historians, we wanted to use the narratives generated in the project to situate inspiration as contingent and contextual, and to see how subjects (creative practitioners) produced experience (Scott 1991). We wanted to examine this in a situated context that positioned its participants as specific practitioners who would be used to producing narratives about themselves. However, it was not just narratives produced in isolation, or in response to a questionnaire but the interactional, co-construction of meaning between us and the students that helped all of us to explore the phenomena. It is significant that the participants did not question our research, but assented to the idea that inspiration could in fact be examined.

Another advantage of a narrative approach is that apart from producing informative content, it can reveal through its various forms, the ways in which meanings are constructed as story types or genres (Squire 2005). Content provided an insight into which of MoDA's objects were of interest while the framing of the narrative provided us with an understanding of the construction of the experience of collections research as a particular engine for inspiration. In that sense we all colluded with the established view that this was the purpose of the collection. For MoDA (Hendon), understanding what and how participants engaged with the collection was a key focus. For the HE partner (Sandino), the interest was in what kind of narratives the experience produced. Although this might indicate a distinction between content and form, our collaboration was based on the assumption of the value of both.

Narratives of inspiration

An interest in visual motifs, pattern, techniques and production processes was often the starting point for our interviews as students were asked to explain what they hoped to achieve from the visit. In some cases they came with a specific technical issue in mind, to see how they could solve a similar problem in their own work. For example, Alex explained that:

I am just interested in the way the designers of some of this garden-themed paper solved a particular problem which is depth [...] I'm just in the very early stages of, erm, planning some domestic textiles like large scale images about garden and countryside, and the one thing that I am sort of, struggling with I guess is how to get depth into a printed image when you are screen-printing with a limited number of colours and you are trying to get that aerial perspective in there, and suggest a world beyond the surface of the, the print, and, it'll be interesting to see how designers of these have tackled that, if they even cared about that, or, how they've done it. So, that's sort of what I was hoping to, to find a bit here.³

Later in the interview, he expanded on this, saying that his interest was in how printing techniques inform and shape the appearance of the finished product:

[...] I guess one of the reasons I'm here is practical, to get a sense of, as well as what sort of image I would want to create: what would work with, with that, because in terms of facilities I am a lot more limited than whichever factory produced this in – that I think for me to try and go above five or maybe six colours in the screen-print would be tempting disaster, in that there's too much to go wrong and the tech we

have, is, I think it's just too low tech, especially when you're printing fabric that's a bit stretchy, has a bit of give to it. So this is beautiful to me [...]⁴

In other words, Alex was interested in how technical ('practical') challenges had been overcome before to meet similar challenges in his own work.

In several instances the students were able to talk at length and with high levels of engagement about seemingly unremarkable objects that would almost certainly never have been chosen for public exhibition. A small textile sample prompted Kirsty to focus on the affinities with and longevity of weave structures. She brought a focused, instrumental approach to searching out woven structures that could be adapted to contemporary weaving styles and tastes in terms that supported her aesthetic and authorship:

[...] my main aim really is to, to find pieces that I can relate to which have a sort of a familiarity with the things that I'm looking at already. I'm a woven textile designer and, and I'm doing research at the moment into combining two different types of weave – one of those being piqué [...] which is a sort of structured quilting type of weave.⁵

Historical inspiration

Another of our questions was the extent to which students were interested in museum objects as historical items, rather than as purely visual inspiration. For several students, historic value was important to their work. For Patricia, part of the interest lay in the physical care of the textile collections, which connected to her interest in how textiles

degrade over time.⁶ In contrast, Jaswant was interested in a textile with a pattern of alternating stripes and paisleys and was able to present a detailed historical analysis of the motifs (Figure 2):

it's just a classic example of how there's examples from the East and the West in it, so you have like a very delicate paisley but then you have – a very traditional small Western flower, it's not a very exotic flower and the colour palette is very muted as well, so you can see – a sort of a fusion of Eastern patterns and Western patterns coming together. But then, there's also something English, sort of very classically British lace pattern in it as well, so I thought that was really interesting.⁷

For Jaswant, the motifs were evidence of the ideas and cultural values represented by museum objects. Her developing interest was in the historical meanings associated with particular textile motifs, such as paisley:

because I do think that they work hand-in-hand, like the historical side and the visual side of stuff has been helping each other, because it's sort of fuelling my brain, [laughs] [...] so things like now in contemporary design, you always see florals incorporated but you never think too deeply into it; but here you can actually start to put pieces of puzzles together as to actually there's been a shift in why we have these certain floral now to what they were and where they came from. So it has educated the way that I design and what sort of things I would use in my designs and it's a bit more of an educated response if that makes sense; yeah, and not just a pretty pattern, shall we say?⁸

Her interest in motif was not driven by the intention to copy them in her own work (Figure 3), but was part of her development as a textile designer with ‘an educated response’, who was able to understand her work as part of a wider tradition.

Seeing and understanding the significance and meaning of patterns as legitimate research is fostered by MoDA’s collection, as Jaswant pointed out (‘here you can actually start to put the pieces of puzzles together’). For Darshini, who was interested in chintz, MoDA provided not only the opportunity to examine examples, but to resolve her conflict over her desire to be innovative with her fear of disrespecting tradition. She provided an insight into how historical evidence provided her with validation for her creative interpretation:

The first thing when I see this, what immediately – what comes into my head is a lot that has changed since how it started [...] what I’m observing right now is the variety, that they have diverged from the starting point. That’s what I’m looking at. How much they’ve veered from the original image is what I’m looking at. It’s something that I intend to do with my project, so I’m just affirming that the world will accept it and it’s alright and it’s been done before so it’s alright to do it again.⁹

In Jaswant and Darshini’s accounts, the textiles as historical objects helped to further their understanding and knowledge of their own practices as part of a historical continuum. Similarly, Victoria, who looked at original Silver Studio textile designs, demonstrates how gender and skill spoke to her across the generations:

Yeah, it was definitely you know, a surprise that they were so beautiful and that people did it so meticulously and painstakingly [...] And I think what was really interesting as well [was that] a lot of the ones I was looking at were done by women working from home and they weren't actually allowed to come into the Studio and they had to post them in [...] So that I did find an interesting angle that I wasn't expecting [...]¹⁰

The themes that these participants articulated: care and conservation (Patricia), historical legitimization (Darshini), objects as generators of knowledge (Jaswant) and the evidence of gendered practices (Victoria), demonstrate how our participants articulated the historical value or 'aura' associated with museum objects.

On being prepared and the value of the unexpected

All the participants prepared for their visit by taking part in the group visit and consulting MoDA's website to make their selection of materials. This helped students to clarify their interests, an element of our research that we did not specifically take into account but that demonstrates the value of museum visits as an aid in mapping and/or revealing the contours of practitioners' concerns. However, MoDA objects are stored in boxes grouped loosely by size and date, and so participants frequently came across samples that they had not expected to see and items that they had specifically requested (Woodall 2015). How they were able to respond to this revealed their ability to cope with inspiration. In the interview with Alex, Linda asked about the value of this kind of serendipitous encounter. He responded by contrasting the positive value of being able to browse in a bookshop with searching for things on Amazon, but was suddenly stopped in his tracks by a wallpaper

sample (Figure 4):

This, is actually very relevant to something else I'm doing which I didn't come specifically to – with the view to talking about in that, this would be with the matt black background and the fluorescent colours, [...] and I didn't expect to see this in here and I know it's a completely different inspiration, and, I presume completely different time-period, but the, the neon, elements here, are, are really, lovely¹¹

His excitement at finding this wallpaper and his evident thrill in looking at it prompted Zoë to question him further.

Yes, just because they are, it's so *juicy*, and, just the way – it's got this exuberance and acidness to the colours that I, I *really* enjoy. It's got a kind of very camp element to it as well [...] I can't imagine what a room with this on the wall would be like, but, but it wouldn't be understated [...] I'm really enjoying this.¹²

Alex's reaction helps to confirm a key finding from other studies of student learning and of learning in general, namely, that the more someone knows already, the more they are able to make connections between new ideas and their existing knowledge (Eckert and Stacey 1998). Alex was not expecting to see vibrant pink and black wallpaper but was able to relate it to his existing interest in kitsch and make connections with ideas that informed other aspects of his work (Figure 5). His ability to do this demonstrates a sophisticated sense of himself as a practitioner: the ability to set boundaries on one's area of interest so as not to become overwhelmed by limitless possibility, while still remaining open to new ideas is a

skill that younger or less able students frequently find difficult to master as their identities as practitioners are in the process of becoming.

On processing what you see

In common usage, ‘inspiration’ is assumed to be something that simply ‘strikes’, an instantaneous reaction to an external impetus. All our participants used the term ‘inspiration’ in their narratives either in relation to the collection as a whole, or the objects, but it became clear that this was based on knowledge capital that they brought with them to the archive and enabled them to make connections and create meaning. In some cases their response to an object was an immediate one (see Alex, above), while in other instances it was clear that ‘inspiration’ was the result of a longer period of thinking and processing. For example, Victoria, who had been inspired by Silver Studio floral designs, acknowledged that this had been an influence on her work, albeit in a way that might not have been evident in the visual appearance of the finished item:

We are doing a project at the moment to do with designing a denim garment [...] It’s a garment, a pinafore, inspired by a similar kind of era actually to this, and so, I don’t know – in an underlying way you could say that’s kind of [a source of] inspiration. But that’s definitely something that I found of interest, ‘cause they [the Silver Studio designs] are beautiful [...] ¹³

Researchers, especially students, who visit MoDA’s collections are often keen to take photographs, but staff sometimes suspect that taking ‘too many’ photographs actually gets in the way of students examining the objects *in situ*. In keeping with our focus on process,

we asked all our participants how they generally recorded their research visits. Most responded that they took photographs or made sketches, to which they would refer back. For example, Darshini described her method to amass a quantity of images to draw upon later:

I catalogue them [photographs taken on a visit] in a serious way and they 're all in my computer, usually I have to flick through images [...] especially when I'm designing, I usually hit a wall, that happens quite a bit, so I start looking at images randomly [...]¹⁴

For others it was the process of looking at an object in detail, rather than its reproduction, that was of most value. Again this became evident in Kirsty's narrative about the 'nondescript' fabric sample:

I often like to draw, to draw structures. I think often if you don't know how something's been woven, if you draw it then you can then sort of start to see and start to imagine how maybe it could have been. And then that gives you a really good insight in how you could replicate it or maybe doing it in a similar way, so I often find drawing helps you understand [...] so you can see the stitches and how they work. I think that's a really interesting way of trying to figure out how, how it started, and where, where the ideas would have come [*sic*] from initially, yeah.¹⁵

For Kirsty, the value of researching at MoDA was in expanding her understanding of how objects that already resonated with her had been made through close observation afforded

by the process of drawing. This extract indicates the importance of the active processing of ideas. Despite looking small and dull to the casual observer, this sample afforded Kirsty valuable structural and visual information, and yet this was only available to her because she was prepared to examine and analyse it in detail, and because she was already equipped with previous knowledge and understanding of weaving techniques. Being prepared and drawing on their knowledge, whether about structures, techniques or cultural contexts, enabled participants to identify inspirational elements for their repertoire as innovative practitioners.

The body in the archive

Much has been written recently about the importance of touch in terms of learning in museums (Chatterjee 2008). While acknowledging the importance of the haptic aspects of learning, especially for art and design students, this was not something we were able to explore within the constraints of this project. Instead, we focused on the visual information in the videos. We were surprised to note how the visual operated: for instance, how the filming framed participants as single subjects devoid of the interviewers' presence (which can only be heard) rather than representing the interaction itself. The single frame enabled us to notice the bodily practices and gestures that participants employed during the study. We became increasingly aware as we reviewed the footage of how the participants' behaviour signalled normative comportment: how to behave in an archive when interviewed! Following Rees Leahy's exploration of how museums have inculcated and produced modalities of behaviour, it became clear that the context of the MoDA archive and our framing of the interviews also engendered a specific set of gestures and performances, not least of which was the stationary, directed focus on specific objects

unlike the 'often transitory and distracted' ambulatory gaze of museum bodies (Rees Leahy 2012: 5).

The majority of MoDA's small textile samples are stored in clear plastic ('melinex') sleeves, which facilitates handling without damage to the objects. It surprised us that none of the participants mentioned wanting to touch the samples. A specific question about this was put to participants, who all immediately expressed the wish that they could. Nevertheless, on reading their narratives and looking at the filmed material, we realized how much the visual dominated as we watched participants point, hold up samples, compare them, but most notably turn the samples as though they were the pages of a book; the encounter was structured through the trope of observation. Although we acknowledge that looking is an embodied response, it surprised us how much we, and our participants, were entangled in sustaining its predominance. It could be argued that the samples used in the project were all two-dimensional, but textiles are a sensory medium; three of the participants were weavers who one might expect to be alert to the feel of fabrics. Although drawing acted as a mediator, all the participants mentioned using their smartphones to capture things that they found interesting. They used their phones and we used the video camera, technology reinforcing the predominance of vision.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, we want to indicate that the gestures that we observed in our participants highlighted how the archive interview informed participants' comportment. Sitting facing the camera, not taking samples out of their sleeves, pointing, but mostly looking, participants demonstrated their competence in archival visits and research: 'Participants in concert and collaboration with others, are ongoingly [*sic*] engaged

in the production of action and in making sense of the action of others' (Heath 2011).

Narratives are of course another form of action that contributed to and supported how the interviews unfolded the participants' stories of inspiration.

Conclusion

Inspiration Examined set out to explore what happens when a small sample of design students are confronted with museum archive collections. How does the rhetoric of 'inspiration' function in practice in this context? How can this help staff of museums such as MoDA to mediate object research more helpfully? Audio-visual recording provided a means of documenting the responses and the items selected. It was only subsequently that we realized how rich this documentation was in other information, such as bodily gestures and comportment, and the continuing dominance of the visual. This article is only able to account for a small percentage of the rich material and new questions that the project raised.

Our exploration was centred on narrative content and form that demonstrated that although there were common and unsurprising themes across the interviews, each participant was able to bring a personal perspective that structured their encounter with the objects. Adaptation and appropriation were common across the group especially in relation to technique, motifs and patterns, combining the nineteenth-century ideology of emulation alongside the modern imperative to innovate. This dialectic was resolved by making designs contemporary, or as Victoria put it: 'to create an up-to-date version of something'. Although all participants appreciated historical examples mostly in terms of technique, it was only for those who came with an interest in cultural contexts that the

historical significance of the objects, or their affective aura, was meaningful. The affinity with the past expressed by Victoria, Darshini, Patricia and Jaswant was, nevertheless, echoed in the significance of affinity as an affect that was a necessary precondition for everyone when they stopped leafing through the samples at the sight of a particular object.

Since they all subscribed to the idea that inspiration could come from anywhere at any time, participants were open to the unexpected and this was therefore, we would argue, a significant element in their visit and the archive as a generator of inspiration. However, even where there was an identifiable 'light bulb' moment, this was grounded in a specific project, the outcome of which formed part of the final degree show. Subsequently, all the participants drew on their MoDA research, reinforcing inspiration as a trajectory, a process of appropriation, assimilation and reconfiguration that guided them towards locating and articulating their inspiration, and their creative identities.

The significance of the audio-visual research methodology is its ability to reveal the thought processes at work when students encounter objects. The method makes apparent – to interviewer, viewer and indeed to the students themselves – the collaborative and constructed nature of meaning-making, suggesting that 'inspiration' is not something that students receive passively, but that they actively create. Several participants commented that the experience of being observed as they talked about objects had enabled them to become more reflexive and self-aware about their practice, and that the requirement to speak their thoughts aloud to engaged interviewers had been a helpful part of the process. The importance of this dialogic aspect of our project was a significant outcome of the research. As Mishler notes, 'Assessing meaning...requires analysing the interview process so

that we can begin to understand how meaning is grounded in and constructed through discourse' (1986: 64)

The Silver Studio collection provides an incontestable resource for the 'craft' of textile design, but one that might be assumed to be akin to an 'extrinsic technical' or 'skills acquisition' style of learning (Davies 2006). However, our findings suggest that while it is true that students brought their knowledge of textile design techniques to these interviews, they deployed them in different ways, depending on their interests and creative identity. 'Inspiration', then, was not something that was sparked by the object alone, but from the interaction between student, object and interviewer. What the *Inspiration Examined* narratives confirmed was the function of inspiration as a structuring concept able to resolve the duality of tradition and innovation as a process most clearly stimulated by research in archive and museum collections.

Figure 1: Participant Kirsty Leadbetter, MA Textile Design, Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London, at MoDA archive. Image by kind permission of MoDA.

Figure 2: Printed textile, c1895, Silver Studio Collection, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University (ST4186). ©MoDA.

Figure 3: Degree show work by Jaswant Flora, MA Textile Design, Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London. ©J. Flora.

Figure 4: Wallpaper with a Chinoiserie stripe and flamingoes, c. 1925, Silver Studio Collection, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University (SW2077). ©MoDA.

Figure 5: Degree show work by Alex Beattie, MA Textile Design, Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London. © A. Beattie.

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Notes

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² Participants were Alex Beattie, Jaswant Flora, Victoria Holmsen, Patricia Hopewell, Katasi Kironde, Kirsty Leadbetter and Darshini Sundar. Filming was undertaken by Catherine Long and transcripts were provided by Maria Georgaki, both Ph.D. students in the CCW Graduate School of the University of the Arts London. Participants were self-selecting, in agreement with the Course Director, Lorna Bircham, whose support and enthusiasm was invaluable.

³ Alex Beattie extract (interview 3, part 1) <https://vimeo.com/144609492>, 24 January 2014.

⁴ Alex Beattie extract (interview 3, part 2) <https://vimeo.com/144609494>, 24 January 2014.

⁵ Kirsty Leadbetter, Vimeo extract not available.

⁶ Patricia Hopewell, Vimeo extract not available.

⁷ Jaswant Flora extract (interview 6, part 3) <https://vimeo.com/144609491>, 24 January 2014.

⁸ Jaswant Flora extract (interview 6, part 4) <https://vimeo.com/144609482>, 24 January 2014.

⁹ Darshini Sundar extract, Vimeo extract not available.

¹⁰ Victoria Holmsen, Vimeo extract not available. Female designers employed by the Silver Studio were not allowed in the Studio itself, but were required to work from home. See (Protheroe 2011).

¹¹ Alex Beattie extract (interview 3, part 4) <https://vimeo.com/144609496>, 24 January 2014.

¹² Alex Beattie extract (interview 3, part 4) <https://vimeo.com/144609496>, 24 January 2014.

¹³ Victoria Holmsen, Vimeo extract not available.

¹⁴ Darshini Sundar extract (interview 1, part 3) <https://vimeo.com/144609486>, 24 January 2014.

¹⁵ Kirsty Leadbetter extract (interview 5, part 1) <https://vimeo.com/144609500>, 24 January 2014.
